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The Geosemiotics of Tahrir Square

A study of the relationship between discourse and space

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The year 2011 saw unprecedented waves of people occupying key locations around the world in a statement of public discontent. In Egypt, the protests which took place between 25 January and 11 February 2011 culminating in the ouster of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak have now come to be known as the Egyptian Revolution. Media reporting of the revolution often portrayed it as a ‘spectacle’ playing out on the stage of Tahrir Square which was dubbed ‘the symbolic heart of the Egyptian revolution’. Tahrir Square quickly became a space serving various functions and layered with an array of meanings. This paper explores the relationship between the discourse of protest messages and the space of Tahrir Square during the January 25 revolution, demonstrating how the two were mutually reinforcing. The messages are drawn from a corpus of approximately 2000 protest messages captured in Tahrir Square between 25 January and 11 February 2011. The analysis is presented in the form of six conceptualising frames for the space of Tahrir Square which take into account both its geographical and social context. The conceptualisation draws from the field of geosemiotics, which posits that all discourses are ‘situated’ both in space and time (Scollon & Scollon 2003), and on the Lefebvrian principles of the production of space which provide a useful framework for interpreting urban space (Lefebvre 1991).

Keywords: Linguistic landscapes, geosemiotics, discourse and space, Tahrir Square, January 25 revolution.

Introduction

Few people outside Egypt had heard the name *midān it-Taḥrīr* or Tahrir Square before 2011. Today, the name of this location in downtown Cairo has become synonymous with the January 25 Egyptian revolution, as well as a ubiquitous symbol for people power. In Egypt itself, ‘Tahrir’ seems to be everywhere in the wake of the revolution. It has become an affix to many a revolutionary term, such as *ṣabāb it-Taḥrīr* (the youths of Tahrir) and *ṣuḥadāʾ it-Taḥrīr* (the martyrs of Tahrir). It features just as much in literature and popular culture as it does in political discourse. Clearly, this place name has come to signify and invoke many layers of meaning. So what did a space apparently so important, so centripetal to the Egyptian revolution signify to the participants in this revolution and how was it linked to their discourse?

In an attempt to answer this question, this paper studies protest messages from Tahrir Square during the 18 days of the January 25 revolution (25 January to 11 February 2011). The

messages were extracted from an annotated visual corpus of more than one thousand images (yielding approximately 2,000 messages). The corpus was assembled from entire photo streams by professional and amateur photographers made available on a range of platforms on the Internet and then excluding images without verbal text. The original purpose of the corpus was to enable quantitative analysis of various linguistic features of the messages, but this paper takes a more qualitative approach to focus on features of relevance to the conceptualising frames used in the study. All of the images in the corpus were captured in or around Tahrir Square – around, because the protests occasionally overflowed to the surrounding areas during particularly large gatherings. The ‘protest messages’ in this study encompass any verbal messages which appeared in the foreground or background of the images. These included messages on banners and placards as well as graffiti-type messages. They also included messages displayed on various objects and surfaces such as flags, clothing and the human body. I use the general term ‘protest messages’ in this paper to refer to the messages in the corpus; there is surely an abundance of messages which were not captured in the corpus and my claims do not extend to these.

The data discussed here is not ethnographic in that I do not rely on observations or pictures resulting from a personal participation in the protests – instead, I am forced to see the protests through the eyes, and indeed lenses, of others. However, I must identify myself as an Egyptian, a Cairene and an Arabic speaker. In analysing the data, this ‘insider’ identity became a resource that I drew upon to dissemble and interpret some of the subtler cultural references in the protest messages. I also approach the data with two years’ retrospect and with added insights from literature that has emerged since the revolution in 2011.

My approach to analysing the data is influenced by the field of geosemiotics, defined by Ronald and Suzanne Scollon as “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses in the material world” (2003: 2); a field which is premised on the principle that all signs and symbols derive a major part of their meaning from where in the world and when in history they are situated. While the Scollons’ treatment of geosemiotics incorporates three broad aspects – interaction order, visual semiotics and place semiotics – it is the latter which they consider “the central thesis of geosemiotics” – “that exactly *where* on earth an action takes place is an important part of its meaning” (*ibid*: 19). The emphasis in this paper will therefore be on the place semiotics of the protest messages in Tahrir Square. However, I diverge a little from the Scollons’ approach in that I treat space rather broadly: I do not limit it to the immediate physical boundaries of Tahrir Square, but include its non-immediate boundaries to take into account the fact that it is situated in the heart of Cairo, Egypt’s urban centre and capital city. I do this to add *context* to the analysis; to situate the discursive practices observed in the protest messages within wider Egyptian culture and society. In doing so, I rely on concepts of urban space introduced by Lefebvre (1991).

One concept which serves as a backdrop to my conceptualising frames is that of *social space*; a space which cannot be adequately accounted for solely by its physical characteristics or by its history (Lefebvre 1991). An adequate account of social space must consider mediations and mediators: “the action of groups, factors within knowledge, within ideology, or within the domain of representations” (Lefebvre 1991: 77). It should also take account of the diversity of natural and social objects in the space, and also consider the networks and

pathways which facilitate the exchange of information and materials. This description of social space brings to mind the Scollons' notion of semiotic aggregates, which are formed by "intersections of multiple discourses and the interaction order in particular places" (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 167). In the case of Tahrir Square, this highlights the importance of considering various 'revolutionary' interactions and the discourses they transmit as part of the resulting semiotic aggregate. Of course, the study of protest messages alone – and even the images from whence they were extracted – provides but a narrow window onto the goings-on of Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of the revolution. This paper therefore does not rely solely on the protest messages in understanding the role of Tahrir Square during the revolution, but rather demonstrates how the protest messages provide valuable contextual insights by highlighting 'factors within knowledge, within ideology, or within the domain of representations' which situate the protest messages, not only geographically, but also socially.

In other words, I see the main contribution of the paper as highlighting the relationship between the discourse of the protest messages on the one hand, and the space of Tahrir Square on the other. To this effect, I devise six conceptual frames for the space of Tahrir Square within which the relationship between discourse and space can be meaningfully discussed. These are: symbolic space, central space, spiritual space, playful counter-space, 'Arab' space, and glocal space. The frames are presented in this order in sections 1-6 of this paper.

1. A Symbolic Space

It seems appropriate to begin this section by surveying the physical characteristics of Tahrir Square. Political theorist, Heba Raouf Ezzat, who grew up in a flat overlooking the square, romanticises the landscape of Tahrir Square and the surrounding landmarks; to her they symbolise Egypt's past, present and future intertwined. She speaks of the ancient Egyptian civilisation represented by the Egyptian Museum, Arab heritage symbolised by the Arab League headquarters, the Islamic religion whose call to prayer sounds from the 'omar Makram mosque, the Nile which flows nearby, Egyptian bureaucracy represented by the Ministry of Exterior and *Al Mugamma'* buildings, all with an eye on the world embodied in the Hilton hotel and the American University in Cairo campus (Ezzat 2011).

However, the symbolism of Tahrir Square transcends its physical elements; this symbolism had a significant political dimension. The January 25 protests were not the first that the square had witnessed: over its history it has hosted a number of mass demonstrations most notably during the 1952 'revolution' (or military coup, depending on historical/ideological standpoint) which subsequently gave the Square its present day name (Nassar 2011). It was therefore no coincidence that the square would become the rendezvous point for demonstrators on 25 January 2011.

As the revolution unfolded, the symbolism of Tahrir Square would acquire a layer of abstraction. Lefebvre notes that space can be marked abstractly by means of discourse and signs, and by so doing acquires symbolic value: "Symbols, on this view, always imply an emotional investment, an affective charge (fear, attraction, etc.), which is so to speak deposited

at a particular place and thereafter ‘represented’ for the benefit of everyone elsewhere” (Lefebvre 1991: 141). Such emotional investment in the representations of Tahrir Square as a *symbolic space* abounded and thrived, particularly post-revolution. Represented as a space occupied by the symbolic and the imaginary – by ‘idealities’ such as exemplary social conduct, bravery and selflessness – Tahrir Square was effectively represented as a utopia: an ideal space for a model society. One example is how the term *axlā’ il-midān* (the morals of the Square) is now often used nostalgically in discourse about Tahrir Square to invoke the supposedly exemplary behaviour of protesters during the 18-day protests.

This abstraction and idealisation of Tahrir Square seems to owe at least in part to the media coverage of the protests which over-emphasised and sensationalised the visual elements of the protests. When experiencing space through line, colour and light, these elements eclipse the experience of other senses (Lefebvre 1991). The “hegemony of vision, of the visible and the legible” can be destructive because it has a reductive effect (*ibid*, 146). Real space is reduced to a representation of space – an *abstract space* with the illusion of homogeneity. The abstraction of Tahrir Square in post-revolutionary discourse contributed to a *fascination with Tahrir Square* (as a reclaimed political space heavily loaded with symbolism) and a *fetishism of Tahrir Square* (through the ‘spectacularization’ of the visual and the intelligible) (*cf.* Lefebvre 1991).

An analysis of explicit references to Tahrir Square in the messages of protesters during the 18 days of protest in 2011 underscores the protesters’ awareness of the symbolic and strategic importance of their location. Such messages included: “The new address of the Egyptian people: Tahrir Square”; “Happening now in Tahrir Square: Egypt”; “I have come to record my name in the revolution of Tahrir”. One sign – pictured on the 31st of January 2011 – listed reasons why protesters must not leave the square in bullet points which summarise the importance of Tahrir Square to the protesters:

- *Tahrir Square is the symbol of our revolution*
- *International media is centred in the Square*
- *The army has protected and is still protecting us in the Square*
- *Leaving the Square exposes our protests to the infiltration of vandals*

Today we remain in the Square

According to Lefebvre (1991), discourse and space can sustain a number of mutual relationships: discourse *in* space, discourse *about* space and discourse *of* space (p.132). All of the messages discussed in this paper are examples of discourse in space and of space (located in and emitted from Tahrir Square), but only messages such as the ones mentioned above could be genuinely described as discourse about space (saying something about Tahrir Square). These messages offer a *representation of space*; the *representational space* of course being Tahrir Square itself. The relationship between the two is mutually reinforcing, combining “reality with ideality, embracing the practical, the symbolic and the imaginary” (Lefebvre 1991: 74). In other words, as the revolution unfolded, Tahrir Square was being represented in a manner which captured both the real and the ideal, embraced the practical, and flirted with the symbolic and the imaginary. These representations reinforced the idealities of Tahrir as a representational

space, which in turn reinforced the representations made about the space, creating a cycle of abstraction.

2. A Central Space

The strategic significance of the geographical location of Tahrir Square for the 2011 revolution was clear from day one. It was the middle ground where protesters marching from various parts of Greater Cairo would meet on the evening of January 25th, only to be forcefully evicted later that night. Over the next two days, protesters would battle to regain the square, finally succeeding in the whirlwind events of January 28th (aka *The Friday of Rage*), and subsequently maintaining it as the protesters' stronghold until the revolution climaxed in Mubarak's resignation. Hence, it could be said, as Nassar (2011) observes, that at a symbolic level the revolution was a battle for the 'liberation' of Liberation [Tahrir] Square. This point is reiterated by Tawil-Souri who observes:

What was most formidable about the events in Tahrir Square was what was most 'placed': displaying the extent to which political dissent became the politics of settlement. Being present day and night became itself a form of political expression (Tawil-Souri 2012: 90).

It is also worth dwelling on the centrality of Tahrir Square, about which Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif writes:

I prefer the word 'midan', because, like 'piazza', it does not tie you down to a shape but describes an open urban space in a central position in a city, and the space we call Midan el-Tahrir, the central point of Greater Cairo, is not a square or a circle but more like a massive curved rectangle covering about 45,000 square metres and connecting Downtown and older Cairo to the east, with the river and Giza to the west; its southern boundary is the Mugamma3 building and its northern is the 6 October flyover (Soueif 2012: 10).

Soueif's description is aptly captured in Picture 1 below, where a protester is seen drawing a sign which acknowledges the centrality of Tahrir Square with multiple routes leading into the square. The Arabic message reads "*All of Egypt is Tahrir Square*".



PICTURE 1. “ALL OF EGYPT IS TAHRIR SQUARE”. [TAKEN 10/02/11 ©YASMINMOLL]

In a similar vein, numerous protest signs declared that their holders had come from various parts of the country to take part in the protests in Tahrir Square. Again, this asserts the centrality of the square which had become a meeting point for people from all over Egypt to voice their support for the revolution. These signs included apologetic messages from people declaring they had come from Monoufeyya (Mubarak’s home-governorate), as well as messages from protesters who had travelled from Upper Egypt warning against the stereotypical no-nonsense determination of an Upper Egyptian [Ṣiʿīdī], for example: “*We are stubborn Upper Egyptians. We are staying here and not leaving*” (which rhymes in Arabic).

Lefebvre describes a centre as the focal point where “accumulated energies, desirous of discharge, must eventually explode” (Lefebvre 1991: 332), a seemingly fitting description of the function that Tahrir Square served for the Egyptian revolution. Many of the labels used to refer to Tahrir Square in the media in themselves implied centrality, such as ‘the epicentre of the protests’ or ‘the symbolic heart of the Egyptian revolution’ (BBC 2011; Fisher 2011; Milne 2011). Nassar (2011) even remarks how that Cairo, having suffered a decentralisation and dispersal of identity during the twentieth century due to poor urban planning and rapidly expanding cityscape, now seems to have reclaimed a centre.

From a media coverage standpoint, centralisation had its convenience: “Focus on Tahrir Square as a revolutionary space gave coherence not only to the demands of the Egyptian people, but also to the broadcasting of the event as a coherent *televisual* whole” (Sabry 2012: 83-84). Although protests were mobilising in many places across Egypt (there were major protests in Alexandria and Suez for example), the focus on a single key location made it easy to treat the

Egyptian revolution as a kind of narrative which began on 25-01-2011 and ended on 11-02-2011. However, this kind of centralised coverage also has its problems. Focusing on one location effectively marginalised all the other locations; for every act of selection is also an act of exclusion. Too often in media coverage of the Egyptian revolution, Egypt was reduced to Cairo, and Cairo was reduced to Tahrir Square (Nassar 2011).

It is worth noting that although the early days of the January 25 revolution drew much inspiration from the Tunisian revolution, the fact that Egypt's protests became at least symbolically if not physically tied to a specific geographical location is contrasted with the decentralised nature of the Tunisian protests. This centralisation of protests would later be seen in other 'Arab Spring' protests (e.g. the Green [Martyrs] Square in Libya, the Pearl Roundabout in Bahrain), as well as in various Occupy movements around the world (e.g. Spain's Puerta del Sol and Athens' Syntagma Square). It is perhaps little surprise then that many references to the Egyptian revolution, and more specifically to Tahrir Square, could be found in these locations (Tawil-Souri 2012).

3. A Spiritual Space

There was a prevalent spiritual element in the Tahrir Square protests which simply could not be ignored. Prayers were observed five times a day in the middle of the square, various gestures of unity between Muslims and Christians were made, and the protest messages were rife with religious invocations and imagery. This abounding spirituality would appear rather striking if not viewed in the context of how deeply rooted religion is in Egyptian culture.

Messages carrying religious references were mostly in Standard Arabic, owing in part to the abundance of quotes from scripture. For example, the Quranic verse "*Now such were their houses — in utter ruin — because they practised wrongdoing*" (27:52, translation from Ali 1946) could be seen sprayed on the walls of the burnt National Democratic Party (NDP) building at the entrance to Tahrir Square. The verse is part of the narrative about the people of Thamūd who disbelieved their prophet Ṣāliḥ; they were destroyed in punishment and their uninhabited homes became a testimony of their wrongdoing. The NDP was Mubarak's much hated political party which had total control over political life in Egypt before the revolution. Its headquarters was the only building set ablaze in Tahrir Square on January 28th 2011. The effect achieved with this intertextual reference is therefore very poignant.

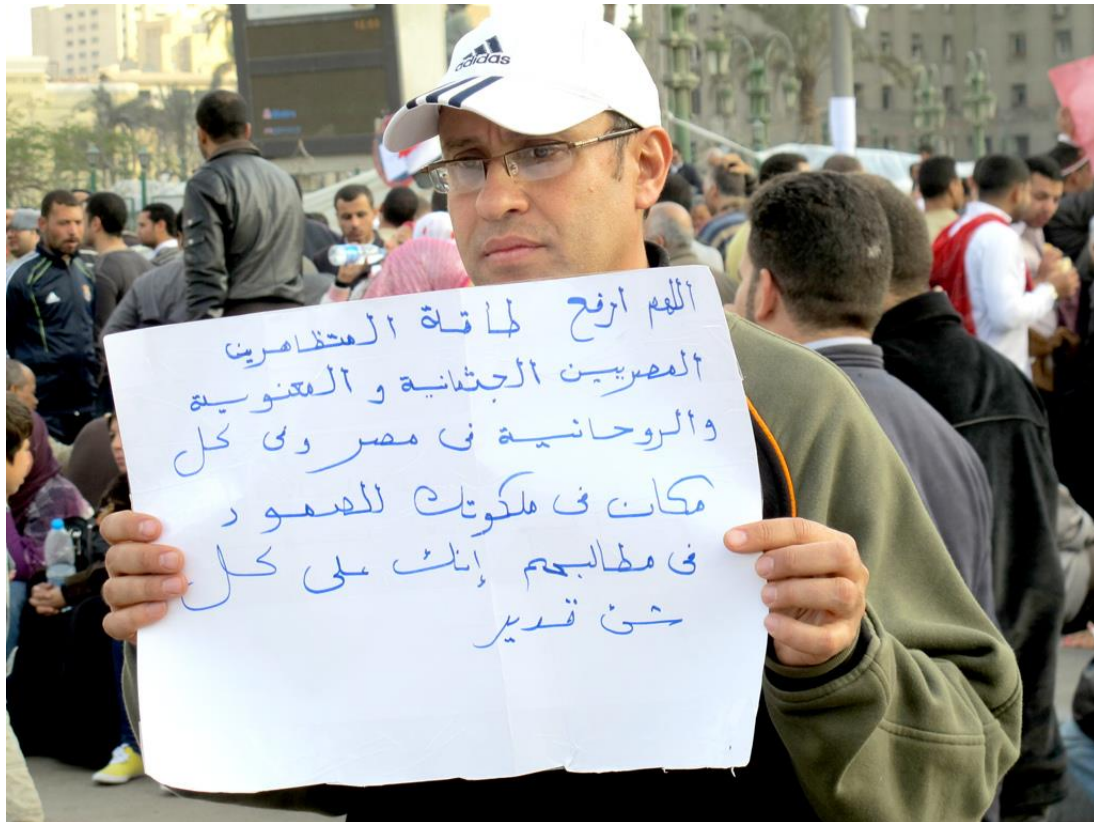
Other religious references included quotes from prophetic traditions, sayings of religious figures, allusions to religious events and beliefs, and the use of religious icons on protest signs. One dominant theme was unity between Egyptian Muslims and Christians; the symbolic icon of the crescent embracing the cross became a common sight in the Egyptian revolution. One sign photographed on 30/01/11 read "*O Mohamad say to Bolus, Egypt's revolution has caught up with Tunisia's*" alongside the icon of the cross and crescent. The message itself, which rhymes in Arabic, invokes unity between Egyptian Muslims and Christians through the use of the names Mohamad (a common Muslim name) and Bolus (a common Christian name, the equivalent of 'Paul'). Similarly, the Arabic message seen sprayed in black on one of the

buildings just outside Tahrir Square, Picture 2, translates to “*We are all against the regime*” and appears beneath the same icon of religious unity. In these examples, the icon forms an integral part of the verbal message.



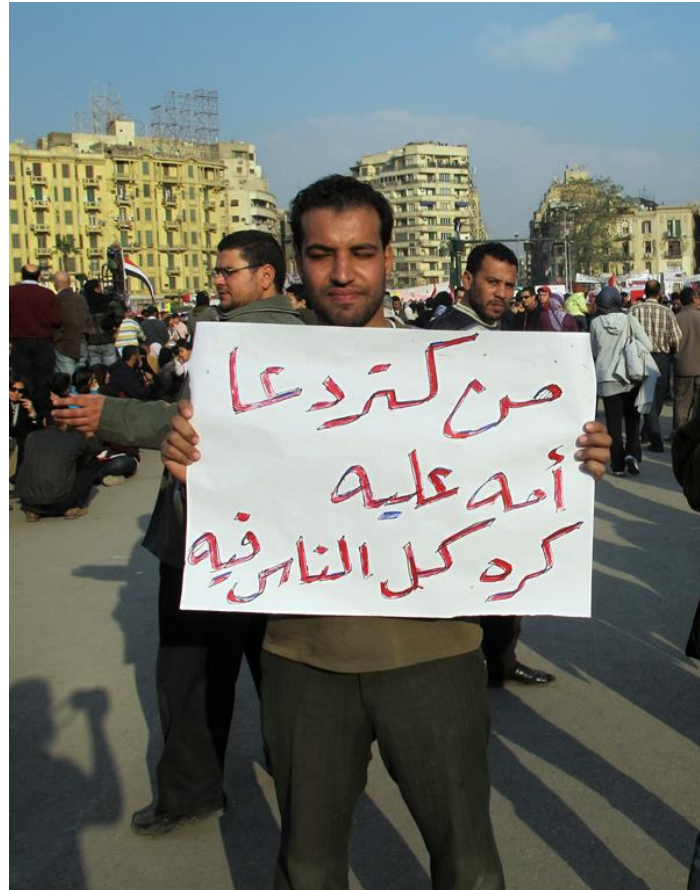
PICTURE 2. WE ARE ALL AGAINST THE REGIME. [TAKEN 03/02/11 ©MAGUED RAMSIS]

There was also the frequent reference to ‘martyrs’ and ‘martyrdom’ usually accompanied with Quranic verses or religious invocations. One female protester was pictured holding an Arabic sign which read “*All that separates us from our God’s paradise is one of Mubarak’s bullets or grenades. Invoke the intention of martyrdom*”. Indeed, many protestors were pictured wearing or carrying white shrouds, with signs declaring that these were their death shrouds (*kafan*) for the sake of Egypt, effectively proclaiming their willingness to die for their country. Numerous other signs mourned the fallen ‘martyrs’ of the revolution with religious texts which highlight their rewards in the hereafter. There were also several examples of ‘supplications’ on signs as protesters appealed to their God for the success of the revolution. The sign in Picture 3 is an example of this, translating into “*O Allah, increase the physical and spiritual strength of the Egyptian protesters in Egypt and everywhere else in your dominion so that they may stand by their demands, for You are all-powerful*”.



PICTURE 3. A SUPPLICATION FOR THE SUCCESS OF THE REVOLUTION. [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ISLAM EL SHAZLY]

Particularly interesting are messages which offer a window into the role that religion plays in the everyday life of Egyptians. One picture shows a little girl carrying an Arabic message which says “*Mubarak will go to hell because he does not do as he’s told*”. Mainstream references to heaven and hell, to God’s wrath and to the Day of Judgment are very common in Egyptian culture and are shared by Egyptian Muslims and Christians alike. These references could be seen frequently in protest messages which were usually, quite appropriately, in Egyptian Arabic. One message clearly directed to Mubarak read: “*A question which begs an answer: what will you say on the Day of Judgment?*”. The sign in Picture 4 also refers to Mubarak: “*Because of his mother’s frequent supplications against him, he made everyone hate him*”. Filial piety is highly prized in the Islamic religion and in Egyptian society where it is believed that the supplications of an aggrieved mother against her children can bring about their ruin. The Egyptian public knows little of Mubarak’s relationship with his mother but here the protester speculates that Mubarak’s ruin is being brought about by the supplications of his displeased mother.



PICTURE 4. “BECAUSE OF HIS MOTHER’S FREQUENT SUPPLICATIONS AGAINST HIM, HE MADE EVERYONE HATE HIM” [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ISLAM EL SHAZLY]

4. A Playful Counter-space

Tahrir Square effectively represented a *counter-space*: a deviant, diverted space which had managed to escape the control of the established order, but also crucially, one which displayed “distinct evidence of a true productive capacity” (Lefebvre 1991: 383). Tahrir Square became a thriving environment for transgressive discourses which violated the “sensibilities and laws of emplacement” (Scollon & Scollon 2003: 166). Indeed, despite the seriousness of the protesters’ demands and the sombre affair of the fallen protesters, a festive, creative atmosphere prevailed over the Square. There was singing and dancing, there was poetry-reciting and stand-up comedy, there was graffiti-spraying and mural-painting, and of course, there was a multitude of witty, creatively displayed protest messages. This celebratory spirit which marked (particularly the final week of) the protests has caused some to refer to the protests in Tahrir Square as a *mūlid* [festival] (Keraitim & Mehrez 2012). The playfulness and mirth of this *mūlid* was perhaps most apparent in the humorous character which hallmarked the protests.

There is a certain Egyptian stereotype of the average man on the street who in the face of adversity makes jokes about his situation. In a *Foreign Policy* article immediately preceding the Egyptian revolution, El Amrani (2011) states matter-of-factly that Egyptians are “notorious

for their subversive political humor”. In fact, El Amrani claims that this stereotypical trait dates back to ancient Egyptian times and cites historical accounts of the unusually “mirthful and irreverent” nature of Egyptians. Similarly, in the introduction to a paper about the role of humour in the Egyptian revolution, Zack (2012) alludes to the same stereotype stating that “for decades, making jokes about their circumstances had been a way for Egyptians to vent their frustrations at a time when saying what one really felt was not always possible” (Zack 2012: 712).

Whether fact or fiction, this stereotype was very much at home in the mocking tone, the satire, the parody and at times dark humour that permeated many of the protest messages, and this was not lost on the media: in a documentary that was produced soon after the fall of Mubarak, Al-Jazeera channel dubbed the Egyptian revolution *The Laughing Revolution*. This feature was also discussed in some academic works. For instance, Zack (2012) examines the role of humour in the Egyptian revolution by grouping humorous messages into various themes. More recently, Salem and Taira (2012) have dedicated a book chapter to discussing the challenges involved in translating the humour in protest messages. Their title “al-Thawra al-DaHika” is none other than the title of the aforementioned Al-Jazeera documentary. The following political joke, which was displayed on one of the protest signs, is an example of the subversive political humour that El Amrani speaks of, citing many similar jokes himself.

Question: There is much talk that your sons have looted the country

Mubarak: These are mere rumours. [All there is that] Gamal opened a kiosk in Aswan [South of Egypt] and Alaa opened a kiosk in Alexandria [North of Egypt] and they expanded their businesses a little so they connected the kiosks to each other.

5. An ‘Arab’ Space

One of the multiple facets of Tahrir Square which the protest messages reflected is its ‘Arab’ character – the homage, both in form and content, to a broader Arab community. In terms of content, this could be seen in the frequent references to the revolution in Tunisia which were suggestive of brotherly ties between the two states. The protesters drew much inspiration from the Tunisian revolution and it is clear that they felt there were many shared commonalities between the two cases. There were also occasional references in the protest messages to the Palestinian cause which has historically united the peoples of Arab countries. For instance, one Arabic sign read “*We want a president who will liberate the Aqṣā mosque. The blood of Gaza’s martyrs is on your hands, Mubarak*”. Another protester was pictured carrying the Palestinian flag with the Arabic words “*Dignity, Arabs!*” inscribed on it, while also carrying a sign with the Arabic message “*The people want to bring down the regime*”, an iconic message which came to symbolise the protesters’ demands. Messages of this kind suggest that, even while they were fully engrossed in an unfolding revolution of their own, the Egyptian protesters were conscious of their place in – and relations with – the Arab world.

In terms of form, there is of course the linguistic tie with the Arabic-speaking world, with Standard Arabic serving as a lingua franca. Another arguable link is the salience of rhyme as a feature of protest messages. There are two possible explanations for the recurrent appearance of rhyme. On the one hand, one might reason that this a continuation of a long tradition in the Arabic language where rhyming words have a certain appeal and resonance for the listener. Husni (2012) supports this position, noting that poetry has always been an integral part of socio-political life in the Arab world. She also observes that poetry in Standard Arabic has the power to unify the various Arabic dialect speakers, using the poem *Iradat al-ḥayā* [The Will of Life] by the late Tunisian poet Abu Al Qassim Al Shabi (1909-1934) as a case in point. The opening verse of the poem, which features in the Tunisian national anthem, was famously chanted by the Tunisian protesters in December 2011, and this was later taken up by the Tahrir Square protesters with repeated appearances of the verse in their protest messages. The verse in question translates to *If the people one day will to live, then destiny must respond*. The intertextual use of this particular verse is a bona fide example of how form and content are combined to signal membership in the Arab world.

On the other hand, one might argue that many of the rhyming messages in fact mirror slogans that were chanted by the protesters. This explanation seems particularly viable when we observe that rhyme occurs more frequently in messages in Egyptian Arabic – the variety in which most slogans were chanted – than in the more formal Standard Arabic. For example, one picture shows an Egyptian Arabic sign which would be read as *huwwa byilbes axer mōḍa wiḥnā bnoskon ‘afra fi oḍa* translating into “*He [Mubarak] wears the latest fashion while we live ten in a room*”. There are in fact records of this message being chanted in the Egyptian revolution. To account for these rhyming messages in Egyptian Arabic, it seems necessary to study the mutual influence of discourses and social interactions within the semiotic aggregate of revolutionary discourses in Tahrir Square, and the ‘interdiscursive dialogicality’ between these discourses (Scollon & Scollon 2003).

Of course, the two lines of reasoning are not necessarily in conflict: it could be said that the overwhelming presence of rhyme at once reflects its resonance to a people with a long standing poetic heritage, as well as draws from the rhyming chants which themselves appear to stem from that heritage. Hence, the use of rhyme in the protest messages not only highlights that this was a revolution unfolding in Egypt but also indexes Egypt’s Arab heritage and its place within the Arab world.

6. A Glocal Space

One of the most important conceptualisations of Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of protest in 2011 is its role as a space where the local and the global merged together, highlighting how the protests were simultaneously inward and outward looking. I will begin this section by looking at aspects of the protest messages which reflect their local character, followed by manifestations of their global character, and I will end with a discussion of how these two are in fact intertwined.

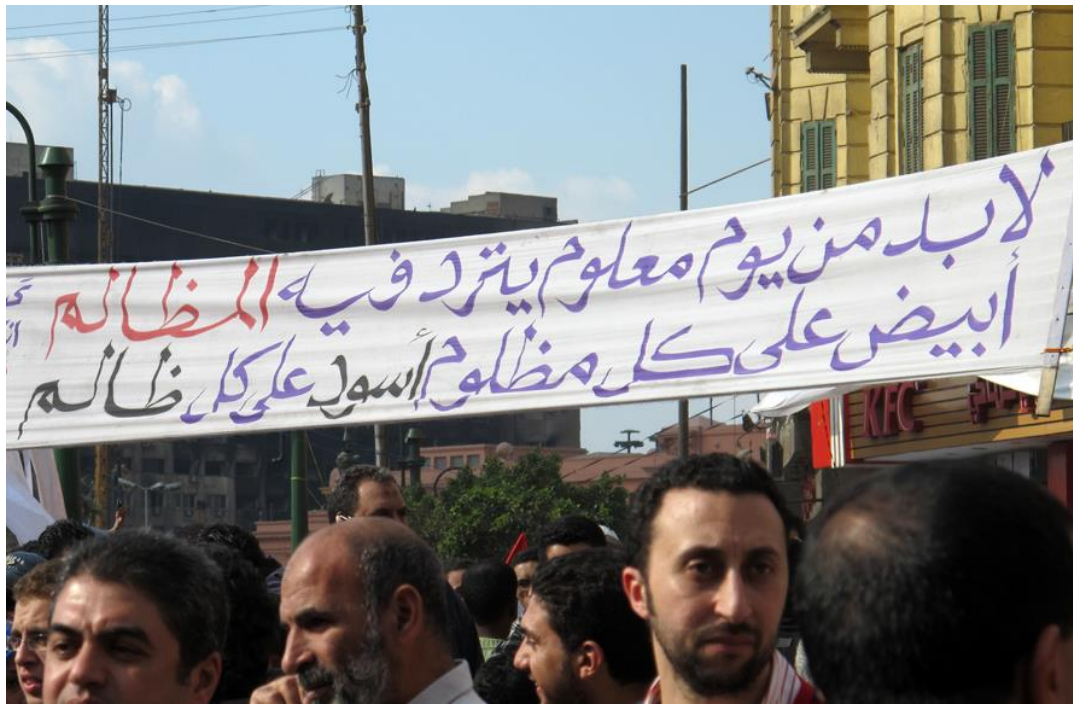
One example of how the protests were locally grounded in their geographical setting is the abundant references to ancient Egypt in the protest messages. One sign, addressed to Mubarak and depicting him as a Sphinx, read “*The Sphinx has understood and you haven’t yet*” – if you are finding it impossible to get your point across to someone, Egyptians would say that it is like trying to make the Sphinx understand. Many other signs depicted Mubarak as Pharaoh – indeed, the most striking reference to ancient Egypt was in the form of an extended metaphor of Mubarak as the Pharaoh of Egypt versus the people as Moses. For example, the Arabic message in Picture 5 reads “*if you are Pharaoh, then we are all Moses*”. Some messages even addressed Mubarak in hieroglyphics. Protesters also quoted Quranic verses referring to the story of Moses and the Pharaoh of Egypt where they could draw parallels with their present situation.



PICTURE 5. IF YOU ARE PHARAOH, THEN WE ARE ALL MOSES. [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ROWAN EL SHIMI]

The majority of the messages were also culturally situated. Culture is defined here as “the system of meaning attached to a particular social group” (Goodman 2007: 333) as well as “a set of practices that constitute this system” (*ibid*: 334). This notion of culture is often equated with the ‘local’ dimension in globalisation studies. Protest messages often contained references of an intertextual or interdiscursive nature which could be traced to Egyptian popular culture, such as traditional sayings and lines from movies or songs. As pointed out by Zack (2012), Egyptian Arabic is rich with proverbial sayings and figurative language – an observation which was made by Swiss orientalist John Lewis Burckhardt as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century. The message on the banner in Picture 6 is an example of employing a proverbial saying to send a covert message to Mubarak’s regime. The Arabic text translates to,

“A known day must come when injustices will be repaid; [a day which is] white for every oppressed, and black for every oppressor” – an Egyptian popular saying.



PICTURE 6. EGYPTIAN PROVERB ON BANNER [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ISLAM EL SHAZLY]

Many proverbial sayings were reworked in the protest messages to produce a type of mocking structural intertextuality for comic effect. *“Honour the regime by burying it”* one protester’s sign read, a play on the traditional saying “honour the dead by burying them”. Song and film titles were similarly reworked for the same purpose. One sign read *“I will not live in Mubarak’s Jilbab”*, an intertextual reference to a popular Egyptian television series from the 1990s titled *I Will Not Live in my Father’s Jilbab* which was an adaptation of a novel bearing the same title by the late Egyptian writer Ihsan Abdul-Quddus (1919-1990). The title refers to the struggle of the protagonist’s children to break away from the influence of their controlling father, something which at a symbolic level Egyptians were trying to do in the January 25 revolution.

Another example of culture-bound references is shown in Picture 7. The text on the sign translates into *“Finally, courgettes have run out”* along with a crossed out drawing of the vegetable. While an outsider might be perplexed at the protester’s elation at an envisioned shortage of courgettes in Egypt’s groceries, an insider will immediately understand that the reference has nothing to do with the pictured vegetable. Courgettes are in fact used as a code name in Egyptian culture for various manifestations of corruption, particularly nepotism and favouritism in securing jobs and speeding administrative processes.



PICTURE 7. “FINALLY, COURGETTES HAVE RUN OUT” [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ROWAN EL SHIMI]

Egyptian popular culture was also the source for yet another extended metaphor: Mubarak as “the laughing cow” – a decades-old label inspired by the French processed cheese ‘*La Vache Qui Rit*’ and used in private political jokes (El Amrani 2011). This metaphor ran through many protest messages in Tahrir Square, so much so that Zack (2012) dedicates a separate category for “references to cows” in her list of themes of humour in protest messages.

I will now turn to the global character of the protests, the most salient manifestation of which is likely the use of technology and social media. While academics will probably continue to debate the role that technology played in mobilising the protests in Egypt for years to come (cf. Tawil-Souri 2012), it was pretty much a settled case for the Tahrir Square demonstrators. Many messages highlighted a connection to global technology and several made direct references to Facebook and Twitter. For instance, one man could be seen holding an Arabic message that read “*Thank you, Egypt’s youths*”, with the word Facebook inscribed in English underneath. Another sign read “*Facebook against every unjust*” in a clear testimony to how instrumental the social networking site was – at least in the protesters’ eyes – to the Egyptian revolution. Similarly, the signs seen in Picture 8 make a reference to Facebook, and the sign on the right carries the revolution’s Twitter hash tag: #jan25. Both signs also carry the Arabic words “*Nass book*” or ‘People book’ in a reference to the combined power of people and

technology. It is worth noting that this label – Nassbook – went on to become the title of a highly-viewed talk show on one of Egypt’s satellite channels.



PICTURE 8. NASSBOOK. [TAKEN 01/02/11 ©ROWAN EL SHIMI]

Moreover, many messages adopted a technological theme for comic effect. Such messages include Mubarak sending the ousted Tunisian president Ben Ali a friendship request on Facebook, an image of a computer file called “Mubarak” being dragged to the recycle bin, and an imaginary snapshot of Mubarak’s Facebook wall. Occasionally, such messages included Arabic in Latin script, a variety which is commonly used by Egyptians in computer mediated communication and which immediately indexes this domain (cf. Aboelezz 2009).

Another global link is seen in messages which were targeted to the outside world. The clearest testimony to the protester’s awareness of how salient their location was is perhaps this abundance of messages which appeared to be expressly intended for mediation by international news cameras. Understandably, such signs mostly used English to communicate their messages. One protester held a sign which read “*Dear tourists, don’t leave, we will protect you*”. Some messages were directed to Tunisia, referencing the Tunisian revolution which inspired and galvanised the Egyptian protests, for example: “*Power of the people, Thanx Tunis*”. However, the largest group of messages in this category were directed to the US administration, mainly expressing discontent at US support for Mubarak. These were some examples: “*Mubarak just go we had enough. Obama shame on u*”, “*America fuck your aid!*”, “*To: America; From: the Egyptian people; Stop supporting Mubarak. It’s over*”, “*USA, we hate your hypocrisy*”; “*U.S.A it’s our decision not yours!*” (Picture 9).



PICTURE 9. A MESSAGE TO THE US ADMINISTRATION. [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ISLAM EL SHAZLY]

Another area where both the local and global dimensions were manifested is language. As a text book case of classical diglossia, two varieties of Arabic are in everyday use in Egypt (Ferguson 1959). Standard Arabic is the more formal, predominantly written variety, while Egyptian Arabic is the predominantly spoken variety of informal interaction. Given this classical written/spoken divide it is striking that Egyptian Arabic should feature so heavily in the written protest messages – more or less on par with Standard Arabic. There does seem to be a specialisation of functions however, with Egyptian Arabic correlating with humour while Standard Arabic correlates with religious references for instance. Messages in either variety of Arabic were clearly intended for local, or at most Arab, consumption.

Languages other than Arabic were also often seen, with English being the most common foreign language. However, messages in English were not necessarily directed at a foreign audience; many mixed Arabic and English and/or contained local references which could only be understood by someone who is bilingual *and* well-acquainted with Egyptian culture. For example, one message combined Arabic and English to refer to lines from a recent box office hit. Another sign read “*Hitler committed suicide*” in Arabic followed by “*can you do it?*” in English, and then “*be a man for once in your life*” in Arabic again. The English appears completely out of place on this sign and contains no clues as to the gist of the Arabic text on

the sign. It therefore takes someone who can read both languages to understand the full message. The use of English in this manner may have something to do with the fact that Tahrir Square is located in the heart of Cairo – Egypt’s largest urban metropolis and cultural hub which has the highest rate of education in the country and boasts many language schools and universities. While it is clear that there would have been an abundance of readers in Tahrir Square who could understand the full message described here, such language mixing would have certainly seemed out of place in one of Egypt’s rural towns for instance.

On the other hand, although the presence of English in a message did not always mean that it was directed at an international audience, the abundance of English signs cannot be dismissed as accidental. As pointed out above, the protesters were very much aware of the extensive media attention they were receiving, and they were sure to capitalise on this. This was clearly evidenced by the large quantity of multilingual messages which provided a parallel translation of the content in two or more languages. The majority of these provided content in English and Standard Arabic, and some trilingual messages even included French. There were also instances of multilingual messages providing translations in several languages, particularly of the word “leave”. However, this latter subset of messages usually appeared to seek affect rather than effect – a few would state that the message is an appeal for Mubarak to leave in ‘all the languages’ so that he might get the message. It is easy to imagine such messages being composed with the help of Google Translate. On the other hand, the use of English and French in the protest messages was more ‘genuine’ and could be said to reflect the proportion of speakers of these languages in Cairo.

I have thus far dealt with the local and global characteristics of the messages separately, but it must be pointed out that this in no way suggests that the two are in conflict. The global and the local, rather than being contending opposites, are in fact two sides of the same coin (Robertson & White 2007). Tahrir Square was simultaneously a local *and* global space; it was a *glocal* space. For instance, while messages which mixed English and Arabic could be seen as inward-looking because they presuppose a local reader who is familiar with both varieties, such code-mixing is in itself evidence of the global influence of English. Similarly, the fact that messages using technological themes would occasionally include Arabic in Latin script is another example of how the global is adapted to the local (glocalisation). The coining of the term “Nass Book” is another example. There are also several examples in the corpus used in this study which indicate how global elements are adapted to local culture. For instance, many messages mentioned the fast food chain, KFC (it was rumoured by state TV that protesters were receiving free KFC meals), and the logo of this global brand appeared on several messages. The purpose of this display however was of course very local; the messages were satirical responses to the rumours. In Picture 10 below, the label “Kentucky” (short for Kentucky Fried Chicken) is seen in Arabic and stylised English above a concoction of Egyptian staple foods for the not-so-well-off – traditional (*baladī*) bread, raw onions, boiled eggs and *ṭa’meyya* (Egyptian falafel) – in an excellent example of how the local meets the global (*cf.* Chun in this volume).



PICTURE 10. OUR “KENTUCKY”. [TAKEN 08/02/11 ©ROWAN EL SHIMI]

When the local and global elements are examined together – and they must be examined together – it becomes useful to revisit Ezzat’s (2011) view of the landscape of Tahrir Square as symbolising Egyptian identity. According to that view, Egyptian identity consisted of its ancient Egyptian history, its Arab heritage and of its Islamic legacy – all of which are reflected in the various frames discussed above, making the protests quintessentially ‘Egyptian’. However, Ezzat also points out how the ‘Egyptianness’ of the Tahrir Square landscape is transported with a certain ‘eye on the world’ – an apt metaphor for the global links discussed here, reflecting the glocal character of Tahrir Square even at a physical level.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to highlight the relationship between space and discourse in Tahrir Square during the eighteen days of the January 25 revolution through a study of protest messages within six frames of space. I also looked at how the situatedness of messages can contribute to their meaning – which is the underpinning principle of geosemiotics (Scollon &

Scollon 2003) – but here I interpreted space broadly to incorporate the situatedness of Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt, and the situatedness of Egypt in the Arab world. Some of the messages discussed might still preserve part of their meaning if they were placed elsewhere in Cairo, some might be relevant still if displayed anywhere in Egypt, fewer would be comprehensible if found anywhere in the Arabic-speaking world, but an even smaller fraction would retain any meaning (and would certainly lose relevance) if placed, say, in Piccadilly Square in London because their context would be lost.

As media coverage of the Egyptian revolution tended to overlook the historical context and genealogies of the various cultural and discursive elements of the events in question, I have also sought to situate the protest messages within their social and cultural context. After all, signs do not exist in isolation: it is only through the concatenation of a sign with its articulation that it can have meaning, can signify – whereby the sign becomes the focal point of a system of knowledge (Lefebvre 1991). Ultimately, the study of the “here and now” must be situated within a wider system of cultural and historical knowledge to allow for a meaningful interpretation of events (Matar 2012).

It could be said that in the same way that the placement of the protests, the protesters and their protest messages lent new meaning to Tahrir Square, the very placement of the protest messages in Tahrir Square lent the messages particular meaning. These were not only messages from a revolution against the Egyptian government; they were messages from Tahrir Square, from the Egyptian capital, by Egyptian people who shared a common repertoire of historical and cultural knowledge.

Throughout this paper, I have presented protest messages, or rather readings of protest messages which were framed within certain conceptualisations of Tahrir Square. However, in keeping with the notion of semiotic aggregates, it is perhaps worth considering whether we can conceive of a reading of Tahrir Square itself. Lefebvre (1991) suggests that the space occupied by a social group or several such groups may be conceived as a message in as much as it embodies functions, forms and structures, although these are not necessarily expressed through language or a verbal system of signs. If we were to sum up the verbal and non-verbal semiotics of Tahrir Square during the January 25 revolution to conceive of a ‘reading’ of this space, the message would probably revolve around people power, freedom, resistance, and creative production. But this would be a grave over-simplification. The truth is Tahrir Square served many functions and transported many complex layers of meaning during and after the revolution. Tahrir Square was at once a physical space, a social space and a symbolic space; it was a counter-space; a space represented, abstracted and fetishised; a utopia par excellence; a reclaimed centre for Cairo, and a heart for the Egyptian revolution.

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